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SOUL SEARCHING: BEARING WITNESS, PSYCHOTHERAPEUTICALLY, TO ONE GOD

Amber Haque, Ph.D.

I would like to thank the journal for inviting me to respond to the above roundtable discussion. There is no question that the topic of religion and spirituality is vital to understanding human behavior and the therapeutic process. Awareness of this in the psychotherapeutic community and beyond increases day by day as more and more studies are coming out to support this premise. Although psychology started as the study of the soul, the desire of some prominent western psychologists to imitate the natural sciences resulted in a veering away from the original subject matter to more of a study of mind and behavior. The topic of religion became a taboo within psychology for many years to come. In recent years, however, there is increasing evidence of a psychology and religion interface and the two areas being discussed together more in the professional circles, as well as in academia (Haque, 2001; Hefner, 1997). Surveys show that more than 90 percent of Americans believe in God (Hoge, 1996) and 97 percent attend a religious organization (Gallup and Jones, 1989), leaving psychologists no choice but to study the effects of religion on human behavior (Shafranske, 1996).

I found the entire roundtable discussion quite absorbing and educational. What was most striking to me was the openness of the panelists, at times revealing confusion about certain aspects of their respective religions or a relatively recent interest in matters of spirituality. Nonetheless, all of the topics discussed were highly relevant to psychoanalysis. Dennis Shulman indicates at the beginning of the discussion that every religion and psychoanalysis (or psychological enquiry) share at least two basic questions: “Who are we?” and “How do we change?” While the questions

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asked by these respective disciplines are the same, the difference lies in how we approach analysis of them. Psychotherapists may look at them from a behavioral, cognitive, or intrapsychic perspective, while religionists attempt to answer them from a transcendental perspective. I belong to the Islamic faith, and will therefore write about the issues under discussion from an Islamic perspective.

For Muslims, the core issue in religion is *Tawhid* or “Oneness of God” and that is what I believe in. Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion that refers to God as One God, Who “neither begets nor is begotten and there is none like unto Him” (Qur’an, 112: 3–4). The term “Allah” is used by Muslims for God. Allah is a synthesis of two Arabic words, *al* (The) and *ilah* (Divinity) referring to *The God* or the only One God. The Qur’an asserts that Islam is the religion followed by Abraham who rejected the many gods for Allah (Q 6: 161). The phrase “freelance monotheist” coined by Karen Armstrong and used by Therese Ragen to describe her religious leaning is problematic from an Islamic perspective in that it implies confusion about *which* One God it is we really worship and to whom we devote our long-term commitments? Islam does not allow a wavering of ideas about God. The Qur’an signifies the same God in many different ways and leaves no doubt about who He really is! Although Armstrong has played the role of a bridge builder between the three Abrahamic faiths, promoting understanding, I feel this particular concept dilutes the essential specificity of the one God who is “Allah.”

A number of religious terms were used throughout the discussion, but I found it surprising that none of the panelists brought up the topic of soul, which has special significance in both Christianity and Judaism. This concept is so important in Islam that soul is considered to be the master of the body, and insight into one’s soul (self) is the prerequisite for the knowledge of God and of everything else. Many psychotherapists who are also religious believe that the failure of modern western psychology lies primarily in its inability to diagnose and treat the human soul (Badri, 2000). Of course, there are some exceptions to this, beginning with Jung and then the psychologists from Humanistic and Existential schools who wrote from a Judaic-Christian perspective, but their writings generally remain overshadowed by secular psychology. Al-Ghazali, an eminent Muslim philosopher from the 11th century, introduced four psychological concepts that are related to the soul and mentioned in the Qur’an. These concepts are the *qalb* (heart), *ruh* (spirit), *nafs* (self) and *aql* (intellect). For reasons of brevity I will not go into these concepts here, but Ghazali proposed that the purification of soul and spiritual growth are the only means for actualization of *fitrah* (see explanation below). My spiritual orientation is also

determined by the belief that human beings are vicegerents of God on earth and are here for the purpose of serving God through humanity. For a Muslim, the spiritual and professional identities should be (ideally) intertwined, because in Islam one cannot separate intrinsic from extrinsic; they must be compatible.

Over the last ten years, I have worked primarily with Muslim clients outside the United States and have not had major problems integrating religion with therapy, either in direct contact with clients or in training university students doing their practicum. I believe there is a real need for helping professionals in the United States to have some knowledge of faiths other than their own, in order to eliminate misconceptions about other religions and to establish working relationships with clients from other faiths. A recent book by Dwairy (2006) covers most items relevant in psychological counseling for persons of Islamic faith. My own (edited) book, *Psychology of Personality: Islamic Perspective* (in press) and other recent publications may also be informative in this regard (Haque, 2002a, 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Al Issa (2000) also covers major psychopathology and treatment issues from Islamic perspectives in his edited book.

I am somewhat familiar with Christian and Jewish perspectives, but less familiar with Buddhism. Although I was born in Buddha land (Northeastern India) my knowledge of this particular eastern philosophy is limited, (although I am interested in learning more about it) and perhaps this accounts for some of the confusion I experienced in reading Jeremy Safran's descriptions of Buddhist faith. For example, he states that in Buddhism "there is no God, yet multiple gods," that "people will pray to various incarnations of the Buddha," that there is no difference between nirvana and samsara, and that "pathology might be considered as a manifestation of the Buddha himself." In my opinion, such internally contradictory statements will confuse anyone, let alone the psychologically ailing person.

A couple of important differences that exist among the Abrahamic religions were brought up in the discussion. The concept of "original sin" for example, raised by Marie Hoffman, and the notion of an evil inclination in human nature, as discussed by Rabbi Dennis Shulman, are alien to Islam. Also alien is the notion that Jesus died for our sins. As a Muslim I feel that such a belief wrongly relieves human beings of individual responsibility, as does the idea, expressed by Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard, that one is not spiritually accountable prior to the age of 20. Muslims believe that Jesus never died! "They slew him not but it appeared so to them" (Q 4: 157). Rather, we believe that Jesus was simply raised to the heavens and will return to earth at an appointed time. In fact, we believe that Jesus will bring the

message of Islam, which is submission to One God, and that this is the message that was brought by all of the prophets, including Abraham, Jesus, Moses, and Muhammad. In Islam, each person is considered accountable for his or her own actions, and accountability begins at puberty; the only exception is the mentally handicapped/ill. Parents are considered to be accountable for the inappropriate upbringing of their children.

The topic of human nature has been a matter of interest for ages. It is interesting to note that Marie Hoffman, representing a Christian perspective, repeatedly states that humans are born in the image of God, while Dennis Shulman, quoting from Talmud and Maimonides, states that “every human being is born with an evil inclination.” The Qur’an also describes man in various ways (Rahman, 1999), but the primary emphasis is upon the idea that “We made man in the best of mould” (Q 95: 4). In Islam, all human beings are created with a natural predisposition to know and worship God and to follow the divine injunctions given to humans for their own salvation. The Qur’an uses the term “*fitrah*” and asserts that all humans are born in a state of *fitrah*, which is the primordial faith implanted into human nature by God Himself: “And whenever their Lord brings forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam, He calls upon them to bear witness about themselves: “Am I not your Lord”—to which they answer: “Yea, indeed, we do bear witness thereto!” (Q 7:172). This oath is printed on the human soul even before it enters the mother’s womb as a fetus, and when a child is born, it has with it a natural belief in One God—this is *fitrah*. *Fitrah* entails original goodness (for details, see Mohamed, 1998). Values like justice, mercy, patience, forgiveness, etc. are inbuilt in humans. When humans deviate from their *fitrah* by denying the existence and injunctions of One God, sufferings and psychopathology emerge. The further one goes away from *fitrah*, the more intense the problems may become. Sin also results from one’s deviation from *fitrah*, i.e., when one leaves one’s consciousness of God and gets closer to the Satan who incessantly incites humans to do wrongful acts. As one engages increasingly in negative behaviors, anxiety, guilt, and depression take over and culminate in various forms of psychopathology. Psychopathology also occurs when humans are unable to control various levels of the “self” or find a balance among them. The explanation of the three levels of *Nafs* (self): a) *nafs-al-ammarah-bi-s-su* (the soul that invites to do evil), b) *nafs-al-lawwamah* (the reproachful soul), and c) *nafs-al-mutmainnah* (the soul at peace) is given in the Qur’an and has been explained by Islamic scholars over the last 1400 years. Demonic (*Jinn*) possession also exists and tends to occur more in people who repeatedly distance themselves from God.

Evil emerges when one gives oneself over to Satan. This topic was also brought up by the panelists, and I will comment on it briefly. Muslims

believe that Satan is a fallen Jinn (demon) and not a fallen angel, because angels, unlike humans and the Jinns, do not have a will of their own—they must follow what God asks them to do. Jinn were created by smokeless fire (Q 55:15) and inhabit the material and immaterial world. Jinn also have free will and intellect and follow religions like humans do. There can be good and bad Jinn (Ashour, 1989; Glasse, 2000). And according to the Islamic faith, Satan was kicked out of heaven because he refused God's order to bow down to Adam. I agree with the various panelists of other faiths that psychopathology and suffering may come to pious people as well, and may be considered "trials" from God. In Islam, these tests or trials are intended to strengthen one's faith and resolve, to teach lessons, and to help prepare for the eternal life. Religious therapy can be extremely helpful in such instances, by which I mean faith-based treatment. Recitation of the Qur'an, fasting, and supplications to God combined with the development of positive qualities and insight-oriented therapies are used commonly in Muslim cultures in either a conversational or Sufi model (Rizvi, 1988). An early proponent of cognitive restructuring was a Muslim scholar named Al Balkhi (died 934) who suggested that just as people keep drugs for unexpected physical injuries and health problems, they must also keep aside healthy thoughts for psychological injuries and impairments.

On whether religion and spirituality are the same thing or different, I would say that being "religious" refers to how one conducts oneself with others as per the guiding rules of one's religion. Spirituality, on the other hand, refers to one's knowledge and understanding of the "inner life" and one's personal relationship with and expressions of one's feelings and emotions towards God. For me, there is no separation between spirituality and religion because they are two sides of the same coin. I believe Tsvi Blanchard makes the same point. My love for God (and the fear emanating from that love) enables me to believe firmly that He is watching every action (including therapeutic interaction) we engage in. In therapy, this belief would help me to take extra care of my patient, because I see my job (and my given role in this world, in general) as a *trust* from God, which I must fulfill to the best of my ability. A belief in doing "good" to others comes into treatment all the time, since, "God is watching!" and this should generally benefit the client-therapist relationship, as well as the therapeutic outcome. The Qur'an affirms that "We are nearer to you than your jugular vein" (Q 50:16).

Let me explain, with an example, what I mean by fearing God out of my love for Him. When you truly love someone, for example, your parents, your spouse, or your children, and they also love you equally or more, you will not lie to them, make them angry, cheat on them, or upset them in anyway. You will not breach their trust in you. This is not because your loved ones will

punish you but because you fear that you will hurt them from your undesirable behaviors. When God is more loving than all our loved ones, how can we dare to breach His trust, for we know that only in submission to His will lies true success! The concept of God in Islam is that of a merciful and compassionate God. "He has imposed the law of mercy upon Himself" (Q 6:12).

An Islamic perspective in psychotherapy emphasizes biological, social, and spiritual states of the client with reference to Islamic principles. The Muslim psychologist analyzes clients' problems and devises solutions with the active involvement of the client. The twelve-step Islamic treatment for addictions is a typical example (Imani, 1992). Religious rituals of excessive ablution (ritual washing of the face, hands, and feet before five daily prayers) and praying to the extent that it becomes an obsessive-compulsive disorder may also occur among some Muslims. One way to treat excessive praying rituals is to have the patient pray in a congregation led by an *imam*. This could relieve the patient of making errors and help him to stop repeating his/her prayers. The cognitive aspect of treatment could be to let the patient know that in Islam all behaviors are considered worship as long as they do not violate Islamic law. It could also be explained to them that God has prescribed prayers at certain times of the day and other duties, like earning a livelihood, spending time with the family, etc. at other times of the day, and all are equally important. With patients making excessive ablution, it has been effective to emphasize the Islamic ruling that waste of water is strictly prohibited. The therapist acts as a guide, with the condition that s/he must be a practicing Muslim. What is important to know is that Islamic values are not the therapist's personal values per se; hence, Muslim clients generally do not tend to disagree with what the therapist has to offer. One of the essential features of Islamic psychotherapy is the cementing of social bonds within one's family, since Islamic culture is collectivistic. Thus the client finds support from within his or her family and friends in times of crisis.

Regarding the issue of rapport between therapist and client discussed by the panelists, I believe that a religiously oriented client would suffer most with an atheist analyst because trust or confidence in that professional would never take root. The ideal situation would be for the therapist and client to share the same religious values. If this situation cannot be met, a "freelance monotheist" may come in handy! You will also find it interesting to know that in Muslim cultures, clients may freely request that their therapists pray for them. People firmly believe that God listens to prayers, especially when they come from those who are more spiritual or less sinful. The practice of seeing spiritual guides/analysts/healers is commonplace in Middle Eastern, African, and Asian countries, mainly because of

strong beliefs in religiously oriented treatments. In such places, even secularly trained medical doctors avail the services of traditional/spiritual healers for the benefit of the client. A lack of religiously oriented psychological treatment of Muslim clients is becoming a major problem in Western countries. In response to the needs of the Muslim community in America, the "Muslim Mental Health," a major chat and e-mail group has evolved in the last few years and discusses mental health issues with like-minded professionals.

Jeremy Safran points out the limitations of psychoanalysis. Dwairy also, in his new book (2006), devotes an entire chapter to it and elaborates upon why the Western form of psychoanalysis is irrelevant for people living in or coming from non-Western cultures. Dwairy describes how psychoanalysis focuses on the intrapsychic domain while neglecting the social influence of the here and now. He further states that exploring the unconscious could be highly counterproductive for people from Asian and Arab cultures who have collectivistic rather than individuated personalities.

Another important issue broached by the roundtable was the theme of what happens when traumatic religion-related childhood experiences lead people to rebel against religion. It reminded me of my interview with B.F. Skinner at the Applied Behavior Analysis Convention in Milwaukee in 1982. In my conversation with him on psychological issues, he was most critical of religion and lambasted the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s that he claimed was fought in the name of religion, a point that is debatable. He also pointed out that although he raised his children in a nonreligious way, they grew up to be very moral persons. Research into Skinner's background tells us that he was raised in a highly conservative Catholic family, which apparently led him to rebel against Christianity. Skinner's grandmother made certain that he understood the punishments of Hell by pointing at the burning coal in the parlor stove, and his father would tell him how criminals end up in prison. Highly rigid upbringing of children without proper reasoning and unaccompanied with love of God may turn children into religious rebels. People need rational explanations to understand religion and unfortunately, religious scholars in most communities have done a relatively poor job of this.

Suicide was also brought up in the roundtable. I would like to share the Islamic perspective, which makes suicide or mercy killing absolutely *Haram* or strictly prohibited. Life is a gift from God that cannot be taken by anyone. What I would do in such an instance is extend supportive therapy, group therapy, prayers, etc. for the client and the concerned family. There was an incident in a Muslim family where the mother was terminally ill and dying and the doctor asked the family to sign consent for removing the

patient's life-support system. The family struggled with the decision but did not sign any paper. The dying patient started to improve after about two weeks and was discharged from the hospital within thirty days! The only situation where I think taking life would be permissible is allowing abortion to save the life of a dying mother. In other words, Islam gives preference to the mother over the unborn baby, but in no circumstance may the baby be aborted unless it poses a danger to the mother's life. The concerned family needs to consult a qualified doctor, preferably a Muslim who knows the Islamic rulings, so the client does not face any guilt or depression later on.

Toward the end, panelists were asked to shed some light on polarization in the world, and the issue of terrorism popped up, apparently in response to a previous discussion on religion, politics, and psychoanalysis. I agree with the panelists that religion and politics have had a thorny relationship throughout history. It is also unfortunate that historically, minority religious communities have been discriminated against in the most civilized societies of the world. This was true for Catholics and Jews living in the West and presently, Muslims are going through the same experience. Muslims are suffering due to an artificial "us versus them" mentality created by politically motivated interest groups on both sides. Mental health problems in Muslim communities living in the West are increasing at an alarming rate, yet there is minimal amount of research on it. Muslims are often labeled terrorists, which has given birth to a new phenomenon called "Islamophobia" that needs to be confronted immediately. In my article, "Islamophobia in North America: Confronting the Menace" (Haque, 2004c), I discussed in detail the issue of jihad, Islamic fundamentalism, reasons for fear of Islam, etc. In an earlier paper, I analyze the development of negative social behaviors and the relationship between religion and politics, but from a non-Islamic perspective (Haque, 2002b).

Tvsi Blanchard makes a wonderful remark that we must value difference; indeed we must celebrate it. But at the same time we must also condemn extremism even if it breeds in our own backyard. Numerous examples of extremism in America include the neo-Nazis and the far right, the anti-abortion radicals and the left wing terrorists, to name a few. At least 335 incidents of homegrown acts of terrorism were recorded by the FBI between 1980 and 2000 in which Muslims had no connection at all (<http://www.cfr.org/publication/9236/>). However, due to the 9/11 incidents and the ongoing Middle East conflict, the media has focused mainly on the Muslims. Also responsible for defaming Muslims and Islam are a number of anti-Muslim writers and interest groups in America. This 24/7 negative portrayal of Muslims for the last five years has led to a dramatic

increase in anti-Islamism in the United States. We may believe ourselves to be objective, but being too sure of one's own point of view can be quite dangerous.

One question that you may ask is why "Muslim" terrorists use suicide bombings if taking life in Islam is *Haram*. In relation to such behaviors that are now seen mostly in the Middle East, and almost on a daily basis, Hassan (2005), a sociologist from Australia, writes that suicide terrorists are "suffering from a collective sense of historical injustice and social humiliation from their enemies. For them suicide is an end or exit from humiliating and powerless conditions of life imposed by other nations. They see suicide attacks as the only means that pay off." Since most of their family members have been killed in wars, etc., these individuals have nothing else to look forward to, except for taking revenge on others whom they perceive to be their enemies. Religion, of course, has been effectively used by the recruiting agents, but the leadership of these organizations has a secular goal. Robert Pape (2003), in his important study on suicide terrorism has also showed that there is little connection between religion and suicide attacks. Thus, to say that suicide attackers always die in the name of religion is not true.

To conclude, I would say that open communication and mutual respect are the keys to solving human problems at all levels. What is really needed is ongoing dialogue among the scholars of different faith communities to understand and help resolve some of these thorny issues. We must learn to use religion for promoting peace and understanding with other cultures. The academics, particularly the psychologists, can play an important role in this process. Let us hope that similar discussions will continue in the future.

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